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Mississauga man's Messerschmitt hit a key factor in decisive battle

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With an unprecedented speed of 540 mph (870 kph), Germany's Messerschmitt 262 eclipsed the existing world speed record for propeller driven aircraft near the end of World War II.

Its rumored existence was confirmed in reconnaissance photos brought back by a DeHavilland Mosquito of the Royal Air Force which had escaped from an aerial encounter, camera footage of the world's first operational jet fighter intact.

Its initial appearance in the skies over France and England shocked Allied air forces as it sliced with impunity through formations of heavy bombers and outflow every fighter.

P-51 Mustangs and Supermarine Spitfires couldn't touch it, particularly in a climb when its performance was, literally, a skyrocket compared to everything else the British or Americans could put into the air, then and for years to come.

At this historic confluence of time and technology, a young airman from Ontario found himself in a life-or-death battle whose outcome would make him the first Canadian — and

one of the very few aerial combatants — ever to be credited with bringing down an ME-262.

By March 31, 1945, 21-year-old Flight Sergeant John Leprich, with many bombing missions under his belt, was the mid-upper turret gunner in an Avro Lancaster, the four-engined heavy bomber workhorse of the Royal Canadian Air Force. On that fateful day over northwest Germany, his squadron came under attack by an ME-262.

From his vantage point in the rotating plexiglass upper turret located between the cockpit and the twin tail booms, the young gunner, along with the rest of the seven-man crew, faced imminent death. As the ME-262 swooped down onto the bomber from above and behind, the gunner saw their only chance for evasive action. Through his earphones, he heard the co-pilot's urgent command: "Corkscrew starboard!"

"No, not starboard. Corkscrew port. Go!" Leprich shouted into the intercom. Realizing instantly which of those two crew members had the better vantage point, the pilot pushed the control column forward and dove left, opening a split-second aiming opportunity topside.

Using his left fingers to hold together the damaged machine gun mechanism, Leprich used his right hand to rotate his turret, track the onrushing ME-262 and fire a burst of .303 calibre bullets into the jet as it flashed past to starboard. Smoke streamed from the stricken German fighter as it went down.

By holding together the broken breech block of his twin-handled Browning heavy machine gun, Leprich had kept his guns from jamming long enough to shot down a Messerschmitt, the most formidable flying machine then in existence.

For his unprecedented achievement in aerial combat, Flight Sergeant John O. Leprich was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal "for great gallantry in the performance of his duty," while serving with No. 429 Bomber Squadron of the Royal Canadian Air Force.



**JOHN LEPRICH,
1945**



Staff photo by Rob Beintema

A Canadian hero

John Leprich was the first Canadian — and one of only a few Allied personnel — to bring down one of Germany's awe-inspiring Messerschmitt 262s during a decisive battle in 1945. ***See story on page 6.***